TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #1 – PRISONERS

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by

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

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PRISONERS

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM WINGS OF FIRE BOOK SEVEN: *WINTER TURNING*

ALSO AVAILABLE

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Note: Contains spoilers for Wings of Fire Book Five: *The Brightest Night*

This is Pyrrhia, where there are seven dragon tribes.

There were seven queens.

Then came a great war, a prophecy, a volcano … and after the War of SandWing Succession was over, a shift in the balance of power.

Not everyone approves of the new SandWing queen.

In fact, the only topic more controversial is the new queen of the NightWings.

Can they hold on to their thrones?

Should they?

In the dungeon of the SandWing stronghold, two prisoners await … what? A trial? Imminent execution?

They're not exactly sure.

They are NightWings, but they cannot go back to their tribe. They are in exile; they are too dangerous to be allowed to return. And yet: too complicated to be killed. (They hope.)

So they wait, and scheme (well, one of them schemes. The other one is catching up on sleeping and eating). And they wonder what will happen to them.

All they want is access to the most dangerous weapon of all: a chance to tell their own story.

They are prisoners.

But perhaps that is about to change.

For the guard with the scar over her heart:

I've been watching you. You're not like the other guards — the bowing, scraping, mindlessly loyal lizards who live for your queen. You have your own thoughts, don't you? You're smarter than the average SandWing. And I think I know your secret.

Let's talk about it.

Third cell down, the one with two NightWings in it. I'm the one who doesn't snore.

I HAVE NO INTEREST IN DISCUSSING ANYTHING WITH A NIGHTWING PRISONER.

WHOSE IDEA WAS IT TO LET YOU HAVE PAPER AND INK?

You *should* be interested. You're going to need allies for what you're planning … and when I get out of here, I'm going to be a very useful ally indeed.

AMUSING ASSUMPTIONS. MY QUEEN BELIEVES YOU'RE GOING TO BE IN HERE FOR A LONG, LONG TIME.

True … but she also believes she's going to be queen for a long, long time … doesn't she.

An interesting silence after my last note. Perhaps it would reassure you to know I set your notes on fire as soon as I've read them. You can tell me anything, my new, venomous-tailed friend. Believe me, NightWings are exceptionally skilled at keeping secrets.

WE ARE NOT FRIENDS.

I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT YOU, OTHER THAN WHAT IT SAYS IN YOUR PRISONER FILE.

FIERCETEETH: TRAITOR. KIDNAPPER. RINGLEADER OF ASSASSINATION PLOT.

TO BE HELD INDEFINITELY WITH FELLOW TRAITOR STRONGWINGS, ON BEHALF OF THE NIGHTWING QUEEN.

OH YES, CERTAINLY SOUNDS LIKE A DRAGON ANYONE CAN TRUST.

She's not my queen. You can't be a traitor to someone who shouldn't be ruling over you in the first place.

Which might be a thought you've had lately yourself, isn't it? I know some things about you, even without a file.

Saguaro: Prison guard. Schemer. Connected to great secret plans.

We're not so different, you and I. Particularly when it comes to trustworthiness.

Just think, if my alleged “assassination plot” had worked, the NightWings would have a different queen right now. Perhaps it would even be me.

Well, if at first you don’t succeed …

I could tell you my story, if you get me more paper to write on.

Or you could stop by one midnight and listen to it instead. But I’ve noticed you don’t like spending too much time in the dungeon. Is it the *tip-tap* of little scorpion claws scrabbling everywhere? The stench rising from the holes in the floor? The gibbering mad SandWing a few cages down who never shuts up, all night long? (What is her story? Has she really been here since the rule of Queen Oasis?)

Or is it that you can too easily picture yourself behind these bars … and you know how close you are to joining us?

ALL RIGHT, NIGHTWING, HERE’S A BLANK SCROLL. GO AHEAD AND TRY TO CONVINCE ME THAT YOU’RE A DRAGON WHO EVEN DESERVES TO LIVE, LET ALONE ONE I SHOULD WASTE MY TIME ON.

I DO ENJOY BEING AMUSED.

THE DRAGONET WITH NO DESTINY

(According to Certain Other Idiots, not According to Her)

I hatched on an island of smoke and fire, under a volcano that breathed death all day and hid the stars and the three moons at night.

My tribe was dying. There were fewer eggs every year, and even fewer of those survived to become dragonets, and all of those were starving, along with everyone else.

NightWings keep their secrets well. None of the other tribes suspected what was happening to us. None of them even knew where we lived.

But they knew about our powers of mind reading and seeing the future.

And that was what was going to save us.

A prophecy. THE prophecy.

That *stupid*, claw-scraping, moonsbegotten prophecy.

Every dragon on Pyrrhia probably knows it by heart (unless you're an ignorant RainWing). Or at least they've heard the important verse: "*Five eggs to hatch on brightest night, five dragons born to end the fight. Darkness will rise to bring the light. The dragonets are coming….*"

And everyone knows it's about five ever-so-special dragons who were destined to stop the war and save the world. If you've met them, though, you might have noticed that they're not all THAT special. They're kind of sappy and disappointing, don't you think? Especially the NightWing. He's a walking tragedy.

You know why?

Because it should have been *me.* I would have been perfect for the prophecy. I would be *brilliant* at saving the world. I would also have been brilliant at leading the other dragonets, proving that NightWings are the best tribe, and making sure things happened exactly as we wanted them to.

Just one problem: I didn't hatch on the brightest night.

I hatched two years too early.

STUPID SNIVELING MOONS IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME.

And so you know who got to be the all-special chosen NightWing instead? My little brother. HOW UNFAIR IS THAT?

I was even *there* when his magical destiny landed on him. I was standing right next to his annoying egg in our hatchery, talking to our mother. Her black scales gleamed in the firelight as she curled around it, brushing the eggshell lightly with her claws.

"Take me hunting," I wheedled. I don't wheedle anymore, just for the record. "Please? I need help. I keep losing my prey after I bite it, and I think other dragons are eating it before I find it again."

So we're clear, I didn't *really* need help. I mean, I was as hungry as everyone, but I can take care of myself. What I wanted was for Mother to stop being drippy and boring and for her to leave that egg alone for even half a second.

"I can't, little one." Mother sighed one of her long, scale-rippling sighs that made her tail flop over. "What if something happens to my egg while I'm gone? It's so close to hatching now."

"What could happen?" I demanded. "Do you think it's going to roll away? Sprout wings and fly off the island? Turn blue and pop out a SeaWing instead? It'll be fine, and you *staring* at it all the time isn't going to make *any difference*."

She fixed her black eyes on it as if to prove me wrong. "This might be the only time I get to spend with it," she whispered. "The brightest night is coming …"

"Blah blah BLAH!" I shouted. "This might be the only time you get with *me*, too! I could get *exploded by a volcano* tomorrow!"

She winced. "That's not going to happen," she said. "Mastermind says we have a few more years before another explosion is due."

"HA," I said. "I bet I get blown up before you take me to the mainland. Remember all those promises you made? Or I should say, all those lies you

told me?”

“Fierceteeth, you’re only two years old,” she said. “You’ll get to the mainland one day. And when your little sibling hatches we’ll have plenty of time together as a family.”

“YUCK!” I shouted. “That doesn’t count! I don’t want a drooling dragonet following us around!”

No one else I knew had to put up with this — this *competition* for their parents’ attention. Yes, yes, it was unusual, Mother was special, let’s all clasp our talons and coo in awe.

Here’s why: Most NightWings don’t have two eggs. Thanks to our horrible death trap island home, most NightWings haven’t been able to have even *one* egg in the last … I’m not sure, but it’s been a really long time. My friend Mightyclaws is the only other dragonet I know with a sibling right now’.

But I didn’t see why Mother *needed* another egg when she had *me*. It should have been exciting *enough* that *I* was hatched. I mean, it *used* to be.

And then suddenly she was all “EEEE, another egg is coming, life is SOOOO wonderful” and wasn’t she proud of herself and obsessed with it. It was like she completely forgot about her first perfectly wonderful egg and the perfectly wonderful dragonet that came out of it.

I think it was stupid Morrowseer’s fault. (If you don’t know who he is, count yourself lucky.) He was losing his mind around then, yelling at everyone all the time; you did *not* want to stand between him and any lava, just in case. See, Morrowseer was trying to make sure someone had eggs that would hatch at least *near* the brightest night. He really wanted some choices for his glorious prophecy.

Instead, he got only one egg with the right timing. One blah little egg that was the center of Mother’s universe.

So Mother had just told me no, she couldn’t leave her precious boring second egg to take me hunting, and I was sitting there glaring at it and wondering who I could trick into cracking it for me. It was small for a

dragon egg, and black, the color of our scales, so it basically looked like an extra lump sticking off Mother's tail.

And then we heard the THUMP-THUMP-THUMP of grumpy talons stomping our way, and in comes gigantic Morrowseer, all frowning and portentous as usual.

"I've come for your egg, Farsight," he said to Mother. That's Morrowseer — not exactly a "good morning, how are you, nice grim sulfur-smelling weather we're having" kind of dragon. But then, neither am I, so I can respect that.

Mother clutched the egg closer to her. "Mine?" she said. "Are you sure?"

Morrowseer waved his wings impatiently at the nearly empty hatchery. "Do you *see* a hundred other options somewhere?" he barked. He jabbed one claw toward the only other egg in the cave. "That one isn't due to hatch until after the brightest night. Yours is it. Congratulations, you're the mother of a prophesized dragonet. Now hand over that egg."

"But … right now? Won't I get to meet my dragonet?" Farsight asked. "Can't we let the egg hatch here and give it to the Talons of Peace later? She could grow up with us, and then we could send her to the continent in a few years. Wouldn't that be better, to raise her like a real NightWing?"

(Mother was doing that dragon thing of assuming her special perfect egg had a female dragonet inside. WRONG.)

Morrowseer snorted. "Unnecessary. Our genetic superiority will manifest wherever this dragonet hatches and however it is raised. And the Talons need to *think* they're in charge of the dragonets, at least for now."

Mother looked down at the obsidian black egg between her talons. "Will my dragonet ever come back?" she asked.

"Listen, you're not the mother I would have chosen either," Morrowseer snapped. "I'd have picked someone who knew who the father was, for one thing." (Note: It wasn't MY father. My father died before I hatched, according to Mother. Starflight's father was someone else, but Farsight either couldn't or wouldn't say who.)

Morrowseer went on: “It should have been someone with more backbone and less fluff between her ears. Like Secretkeeper; she’s got a sensible head on her shoulders and she’d hand over her dragonet for a prophecy in a heartbeat. But she hasn’t got a dragonet, and you do, so do your duty and give it to me.” He lowered his voice to a growl. “For the sake of the tribe’s *survival*, Farsight.”

I didn’t quite understand all that back then, of course. NightWing secrets are handed out bit by bit to dragonets as we get older. I’d heard of the Talons of Peace, but all I knew was that they were an underground movement trying to end the War of SandWing Succession.

But here’s what I did understand: Morrowseer was taking that egg someplace far away from the island. The dragonet in that egg was going to grow up in a world with proper trees and sky and plenty to eat. The Talons of Peace would treat it like a queen, and one day it would save the entire NightWing tribe.

“You could take me instead,” I blurted. “I can fulfill the prophecy! I don’t have *any* fluff between my ears!”

Morrowseer barely glanced at me. “You’re much too old,” he sniffed.

“So send me out later and lie about my age,” I suggested. “How would anyone know when I was hatched? I’m scrawny enough. A year from now I bet I could pass for a one-year-old.”

“Fierceteeth, stop,” my mother whispered.

“She’s bold,” Morrowseer said, flicking his gaze over me for a moment longer. “Boldness is useful. Idiocy, however, is not.” He reached out and snatched the egg from Mother’s claws. She let it go without protesting any more, although she gave it the most soppy, cow-eyed, woeful look you’ve ever seen. It made me want to claw her snout right off.

“Thank you for your service to the tribe,” Morrowseer snarled at her. He turned to stomp away.

“Think about my offer!” I called after him. “Bad things happen to little dragonets all the time! If you need a backup prophecy dragon, I’ll be right here!”

He paused in the cave entrance, a shudder rippling down his spine. For a long moment he didn't move, and then he turned his head slightly, just far enough to give the last remaining egg a dark, thoughtful look. And then off he went, with the egg that turned out to contain my brother, Starflight, the *least* bold and *most* idiotic NightWing who has *ever hatched in the history of Pyrrhia.*

Was I thrilled that my competition was gone? Did I welcome my mother back with open wings, ready to be her precious beloved one and only again?

I most certainly did not. I wasn't going to be duped anymore. Now I knew how easily she could drop me. I'd seen how shallow her loyalty ran.

Maybe if she had begged my forgiveness …

But she didn't. Instead she MOPED for AGES and it was SO BORING, you have no idea.

So I spent my time and energy on Morrowseer instead. He was the one with useful connections. He was the one who could get me to the continent and maybe into that prophecy, once he realized how completely NightWing I am.

(That's another word for awesome, if you're slow on the uptake, SandWing.)

I followed him around the fortress. I showed up whenever he was lecturing, even if it wasn't to my class. I happened to be around whenever he needed a message sent to someone. I "accidentally" ran into him in the island's small patch of forest and "coincidentally" drove prey in his direction.

In my head, I sometimes pretended he was my father.

But did all that work make him like me even one tiny bit?

Not as far as I could tell.

And did he ever send me to the mainland?

NOT ONCE.

Technically, NightWing dragonets aren't allowed off the island until they are ten. Apparently we need ten years of training in how to keep the

tribe's secrets first.

But I was GREAT at keeping secrets, and if my dopey BROTHER could be on the mainland all that time, I didn't see why *I* couldn't at least *visit* it. Especially once the tunnel to the rainforest was built. It would have been so easy to let me hop through some night when no one was around. I just wanted to breathe real air and see the stars for a *minute.* That didn't seem like too much to ask — and I did ask, over and over again, until Morrowseer called me a pest and banished me to the dragonet dormitory.

My point is that I grew up in the most terrible place in Pyrrhia, but it made me strong. This dungeon is nothing in comparison. Here, we get to eat every day and your queen even lets us out to stretch our wings more frequently than I can believe.

But I deserve to be free. Everything I did, all my so-called "crimes," were for the good of my fellow NightWings. I was trying to find us an ally who would restore our power. I was trying to save us from being controlled by another tribe. I was trying to make sure we had a real home of our own!

And if I had succeeded, *I'd* be the hero right now, instead of those bleeding heart "dragonets of destiny."

I *deserve* to be part of my tribe again, and they deserve a queen who cares about them and understands what they've suffered — not the teeth-grinding mistake they have now.

I believe in the separation of the tribes and the importance of maintaining the royal bloodlines, if possible. I suspect you do, too.

One way or another, I'm getting out of here. If you help me, you'll gain a determined ally who can help you get what *you* want.

If you don't, you'll be just another guard I have to kill on my way out.

— Fierceteeth

I SEE. QUITE A TRAGIC TALE.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR FELLOW PRISONER? THE ACCESSORY TO YOUR CRIMES?

IS HE A MISUNDERSTOOD HERO AS WELL? IS HE NECESSARY TO YOUR AMBITIOUS PLANS, OR DO YOU INTEND TO LEAVE HIM HERE TO DESSICATE?

BRAINS AND THE BEAST

Strongwings is coming with me wherever I go. Forever. That's non-negotiable.

I don't care if no one understands why he's mine. It's my heart; I can stick whomever I want in there.

But I'll tell you some of his story since it is late and I cannot sleep at night anymore, not when there's moonlight pouring in through those small, high-up windows. Also, I enjoy wasting the queen's lamp oil.

And if you are even considering setting me free while keeping him trapped, I will roast your talons one claw at a time.

(Or perhaps I'll simply betray you to that six-clawed interrogator who oversees the guards — I bet *he'd* like to hear about the secret map you've been drawing of the stronghold, or the way you stand in dark corners and whisper to someone who isn't there.)

I knew Strongwings from the moment I hatched, although I did not particularly like him at first. He was three years older than me, but the dragonet dormitory in the NightWing fortress had more than enough space for the smattering of dragonets in the tribe, so we all lived there together until the age of ten.

Strongwings was a notorious mess and possibly the slowest dragon in the tribe. He kept leaving bits of carcasses around his sleeping spot, or accidentally stepping on everyone's tails on his way to bed at night. He never spoke in class, unless it was to say something boneheaded to one of the other dragonets, who always ignored him. Everyone ignored him. *I* ignored him. I was too busy and ambitious to make friends. Besides, he wasn't the sharpest claw on the dragon, if you know what I mean.

I only remember feeling mildly relieved when he turned ten and was moved to the adult quarters, taking his mess and his snoring and his stupid

jokes with him. I didn't even see him again until a few months later, soon after my seventh hatching day.

It was a miserable day on the island — more miserable than usual, I mean. The clouds were pouring this drippy mix of rain and sleet all over us, so it was cold and wet outside but stifling inside, and all the ashes in the air were sticking damply to our wings and creeping into our snouts, so it felt as though we were breathing volcano even more than usual.

I snuck out of class because I couldn't take one more minute of Great and Glorious NightWing History when my lungs felt like moldering sacks of wet paper. That teacher is nearly blind anyway; he didn't even notice me slipping out the back tunnel.

The halls of the fortress smelled like wet dragon. Gusts of damp wind and splatters of sleet kept swirling in through the cracks in our walls, sizzling on the coals and turning the air smoky. I was looking for somewhere as far away from the outside as possible — a corner of the fortress that was completely protected — and I thought of Mastermind's lab.

Mastermind was our science teacher, and the tribe's resident genius, if you can believe all the hype about him. I say, if he's such a genius, he should be able to explain stuff in a way that dragons can actually understand. Instead he showed up once a week, blathered on for hours using the biggest, most made-up words possible, and then slithered back to his lab, leaving all of us even dumber than we were before.

He had a whole giant inner room of the fortress for his experiments, and it was well protected from the outside air. Mastermind was obsessive about keeping other dragons from touching his stuff, but maybe I could sit in a corner and … hmm. Well, maybe he wouldn't be there.

He was definitely there.

"YOU'VE RUINED IT! THE WHOLE THING! OUR ENTIRE TRIBE COULD BE WIPED OUT BECAUSE OF YOUR STUPIDITY!"

I paused outside the door that said LABS and tilted my head, listening. There was an enormous crash and then several smaller crashes. And then scrabbling talons, and I just barely managed to leap back before the door slammed open and a beefy black dragon came charging out, flapping his wings wildly.

"AND DON'T COME BACK OR I WILL DISSECT YOU ALIVE!" Mastermind's voice bellowed as the door swung shut.

The dragon flopped over on the floor, panting for breath.

"Hello, Strongwings," I said. "Causing disasters as usual, I see."

"Oh," he said, sitting up fast. "Uh, hi, Fierceteeth."

"What did you do now?" I asked.

"I knocked a bottle of … uh … something into a vat of … uh … something else," he said. He scratched his head, looking mournful. "There were bubbles … and some weird gas … I don't know. Sometimes he explains the experiments to me, but that just makes it more confusing."

"Kind of an idiot MudWing move, going in there in the first place," I observed. "You plus breakable things and unstable chemical compounds? Clearly a bad idea."

"That's what I said!" he protested. "I didn't want this job! It was Mother's idea, and she's friends with Princess Greatness, so that's, you know, they made it happen. But I told them the dumbest NightWing ever hatched shouldn't be Mastermind's assistant."

There were a few more ominous crashing sounds from behind the door.

I realized Strongwings was giving me a funny look.

"What?" I demanded.

"I was kind of hoping you'd disagree with me there," he said.

"About what?" I asked.

"About me being the dumbest NightWing who ever hatched."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. I *would* have, if I could think of anyone dumber."

He actually laughed, which was intriguing. Most NightWings will try to counter your sarcasm with more sarcasm, as though every conversation is a

competition to see whose wit is more biting. No one ever stops to acknowledge that someone else was funny.

“Ah well,” he said. “Perhaps they’re right. I’ll probably be less trouble here than crashing around leaving ‘obvious trails’ in the rainforest.”

“You’ve been to the rainforest?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “What was it like? Tell me everything at once.”

He glanced at the door to the lab, then bared his teeth at me in an awkward way, which turned out to be his version of a smile. “Or I could just show you.”

“That’s not funny,” I snapped. “I may be half your size, but I can still bite you.”

“I’m serious!” he protested. “I can distract the guard and take you through. No one will find out, and if they do, what are they going to do to me? Give me a worse job than this? Pretty sure there isn’t one.”

I could think of much worse punishments I’d personally witnessed — things involving lava or an extra week between rations — but I didn’t bring them up. If this crazy dragon wanted to take me to the rainforest, I wasn’t going to talk him out of it.

“Fine. We should find out who’s guarding the tunnel,” I said, striding off down the hall.

“Oh, uh — right now?” he said. “I mean, uh … yes, right now. Of course. That is when we are going. Now. Yes, that’s what I meant.”

I ignored his mumbling. I have found that all interactions work better when you only pay attention to the things that are actually said to you, instead of the things you think they’re trying to say.

“Should be Deadlyclaws today, I think,” he said, catching up to me.

“He’s quite sharp,” I said. “What’s your plan?”

“Um …” he said.

I glared at him. “You DO have a plan.”

“I do! I do. I got it. Don’t worry.”

He paced along beside me, flicking his wings and furrowing his brow. I’d never stood this close to him before, but now it struck me that he really

was nearly twice my size. He was unusually burly for a starving NightWing — you could still see his ribs, but they were big ribs, attached to a big back and massive shoulders. He could probably grow to be even bigger than Morrowseer one day.

I liked that thought. I liked walking down the hall next to, essentially, a small lumbering mountain. It kind of made me feel as if I had something that would shield me from the lava if the volcano *did* explode all of a sudden.

We left the fortress and flew over the molten landscape in the rain. My wings were instantly soaked and chilled to the bone, but I didn't care. We were going to the tunnel. We were going to the *rainforest*. I'd hovered outside the cave before, but I'd never been in. No dragonets anywhere near the secret tunnel, that was the rule.

Did I care about breaking it? No, I did not. It was a stupid rule. One that could apply to other dragonets, but not to me. I was at *least* as clever and trustworthy as Mr. Fatwings over here. Besides, the nice thing about doing it this way was that *he'd* get in trouble, not me.

Well, so I thought, anyway.

"Uh … wait here," he said, steering us down to the beach. My talons sank into the wet black sand and I squinted through the downpour as he flew up to the cave. A few moments later, he appeared at the entrance and waved to me.

That was weird. I hadn't seen Deadlyclaws come out.

Turns out, that's because Strongwings's idea of a "distraction" was to sneak up and clonk someone over the head. Deadlyclaws was lying unconscious inside the cave, next to a small fire in front of the tunnel entrance.

I regarded him for a moment.

"He won't wake up for a while," Strongwings mumbled.

"I see," I said. "Did he see you?"

"Uh," he said. "No? I don't think so. He was poking the fire."

Well, it would be idiocy to waste this opportunity. I climbed over Deadlyclaws and stepped into the tunnel.

"Hang on," Strongwings protested. "*I'm* taking you to the rainforest. That means I go first. Scooch over."

I snorted a small flame at him, spread my wings, and flew into the darkness with him flapping along, grumbling, behind me.

Up and up, around and sideways, and then — the chill fell out of the air, and light shone up ahead.

I burst out into sunlight.

And warmth.

And *breathing.*

You can't understand it because you grew up with all of that. Most dragons don't spend a single moment of their lives thinking about breathing, but for NightWings, it's an on going, horrible experience. On the volcano, you suck in particles of ash with every breath. Your lungs always feel like they're on fire. The inside of your throat is scraped like you've been swallowing giant pieces of eggshell.

I guess we're used to the smell of sulfur and rotting prey and smoke, but once you leave it — once you notice it — it's *awful* to go back to.

Stepping into the rainforest was like plunging my snout into a cauldron full of plants. I was so overwhelmed by the assault on my nose that I didn't even register what was in front of my eyes for the first few minutes.

I just breathed. And smelled. And smelled and breathed and *breathed*.

At last I was able to focus on Strongwings's face, his black eyes peering into mine, a wild assault of greenery erupting behind him.

"You look enormously pleased with yourself," I said sharply.

"I knew this would do it," he said, tucking his wings in with a self-satisfied nod. "I've never ever seen you smile, but I knew if I brought you here …"

I glared at him. "Does that make you some kind of genius? I'm sure every dragon reacts the same way."

Now my senses were adjusting and I could also hear the sounds of the rainforest: the rushing wind in the trees, the chatter of golden-furred monkeys overhead; the faraway calls of birds, the nearby river burbling contentedly to itself. I could feel the humming heat of the sun melting into my scales.

"Yes, that's true," Strongwings said, "but I wanted to be the one to see *your* face."

I studied him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because —" He floundered, his claws stabbing nervously at the dirt below us. "Uh. Because you're — well, you're just — you're the only Fierceteeth. You know?"

That was true. I AM the only Fierceteeth. I don't need doting parents to tell me I'm special and brilliant and ferocious. I don't need a prophecy to make me unique and important. I am FIERCETEETH.

But it was unusual for someone else to notice.

"Hmm," I said, taking a step closer so I could eye him up and down. He did not appear to be joking or teasing me. In general I am not a fan of sentimental sincerity — in general that is *not* a NightWing trait — but it turns out there are certain dragons who can pull it off.

Well, one. There is *one* dragon who can talk to me like that without getting bitten, or stabbed, or bitten AND stabbed.

"Want to go flying?" he asked. "And eat mangoes? And jump in a pool of water that is not cold gray sludge, or so full of salt that all your scratches burn like fire?"

I did want to do all those things. But I had never pictured doing them with Strongwings, of all dragons. I didn't want him to think I was a dragon who would just lower all my defenses the moment I felt sunshine on my scales.

"Oh, right," I scoffed. "As if *you* are fast enough to catch a *mango*. I'd like to see *that*."

He started laughing again, although I wasn't entirely sure why this time. Dragons who might be laughing at me usually have an unpleasant encounter

with my claws before they draw their next breath. But for some reason his laughter didn't make me want to stab him in the nose.

So we flew, and we swam, and we ate more food than I knew existed in the world, and I did not care even one tiny iota when we returned to the tunnel hours later, as the sun was slanting down through the trees, and found glowering Morrowseer and furious Deadlyclaws waiting for us.

I decided to go on the offensive before they could start yelling.

"Oh, good. I have something to say to you, you conniving, lying snake," I snapped at Morrowseer as we landed. Strongwings jumped and sidled a step away from me, then two steps closer to me. I could feel his gaze melting along the side of my face — shocked, or anxious, or impressed; I didn't know which and couldn't be bothered with him right then.

"Do you know how many rules you've broken?" Morrowseer bellowed, ready to launch into his prepared rant. "How dare you — *what* did you just say to me?"

"I called you a conniving, lying *snake*," I spat. "Why can't we move here right now? Why would you keep us on that miserable island a moment longer when *this* is *here*, ready and waiting for us?" I spread my wings at the forest around me.

"Don't question your elders," Morrowseer fumed. "You have no idea what the risks are, or what else must be done —"

"What risks?" I shot back. "The RainWings? Are you afraid they're going to throw bananas at you? It would probably take them months to even notice we're here."

This was before we discovered what RainWings could do, obviously. It wasn't in any of the scrolls. We didn't find out until about a year later, when a dragon called Vengeance got a demonstration all over his stupid face. (No big loss, for the record. He was hideous before the encounter with that RainWing, too.)

"It's Queen Battlewinner's decision," said Morrowseer, "and she has decided we're not ready. Would you like to take it up with her?"

That shut me up for a minute. No one had seen the queen in years, but she spoke through Morrowseer and her daughter, and in the fortress we could feel her eyes on us all the time. She knew everything, and if you were unlucky enough to catch her wrathful attention, her punishments were always swift and severe.

"And don't forget the IceWings, you arrogant dragonet," Deadlyclaws growled. "If we saunter in and make our home here, how long will it be before they find out where we are? We're safe on the island, but once they find us here, they'll swoop down to kill us all."

"That's right," Morrowseer hissed. "The queen's plan will give us the powerful ally we need to protect us in our new home. So we stick to the path of the prophecy. That's the only way for us to do this safely."

"And you could have jeopardized all of it," Deadlyclaws added. "You could have been seen without even realizing it. A camouflaged RainWing could have spotted you and be reporting back to their queen right now."

"Or what if you had been captured?" Morrowseer snarled.

"Captured by RainWings?" I rolled my eyes. "Terrifying."

"You'll be sorry for this," he hissed. "I'll make sure you never set claws in this rainforest again, not until we move here."

No one was going to see my despair, I told myself fiercely. *Don't let him know that it feels like your eyes are being ripped out. Don't let him see that you care.* I curled my claws into the ground as if I could root myself there, so no one could ever drag me away. Quietly I inhaled, trying to drag the scent of mangoes and moss and river rocks deep into my lungs, trying to imprint this place on my scales forever.

"But it's my fault," Strongwings blurted suddenly. "This was my idea, not hers."

"Ha!" Morrowseer shot a blast of smoke out of his nostrils. "Fierceteeth has been badgering us about coming here for years. We know what she's like. There's no need to take the fall for her … whatever your name is."

"I'm telling the truth," he insisted stoutly. "I told her I'd bring her here. *I* knocked out Deadlyclaws — sorry about that."

Deadlyclaws snarled at him.

“She wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me,” he said. “Punish me instead.”

He *was* telling the truth, but he didn’t have to. I had already decided not to shove the blame onto him. And clearly Morrowseer had decided what he wanted to believe, too, based on what he already thought of me.

“So you’re suggesting we ban *you* from the rainforest instead?” Morrowseer said mockingly.

“Yes,” said Strongwings.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I said at the same time. “I wasn’t supposed to see this place for three more years anyway. You’re old enough to get put on hunting duty or assigned to a spy mission here. Don’t throw that away for nothing.”

“You’re not nothing,” Strongwings said with an odd catch in his voice.

And maybe his slowness had infected me for the day, too, because that’s when I finally figured it out.

The risk he’d taken wasn’t about proving his bigness or enjoying a daring trip outside the rules. For Strongwings, this was about *me*.

He saw me, and had seen me for a while, although I’d never noticed before.

Unlike certain other dragons, if Strongwings was given a choice, he would choose *me*.

I wrapped my tail around his and lifted my chin defiantly at Morrowseer. “You can punish us together,” I said. “We don’t care.”

And he did, by the way, but it wasn’t anything worse than regular life on the island. We had some terrible extra assignments for a year, but we did them together, which made them less terrible. And we figured out a smarter way to sneak off to the rainforest without getting caught. (Well, *I* figured it out and let him come along.)

Anyway, that’s a long story to illustrate a simple point: Strongwings is my dragon. He will do anything to keep me alive. He is the only dragon I trust in all of Pyrrhia.

And I am not going anywhere without him. Put that up your snout and smoke it.

— *Fierceteeth*

YOU ARE A COMPLICATED DRAGON, NIGHTWING.

SUPPOSE I COULD HELP YOU, AS YOU PRESUME.

WHAT IS IT, EXACTLY, THAT YOU THINK YOU CAN DO FOR ME?

HOW IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN

All right, Saguaro, SandWing guard with a scar over your heart. This is basic logic, so it shouldn't strain your brain too much to follow along.

Imagine for a moment that my plan had succeeded.

Imagine that I had talked my companions into going to the stronghold instead of stopping for help in the Scorpion Den. (Their idea, and a terrible one, as I should have guessed it would be.)

Imagine that I had ended up in Burn's throne room instead of in prison.

Now picture me giving her on a silver platter exactly what she wanted: the location of the prophecy dragonets.

Can you see it in your mind? The army of SandWings en route to the rainforest? With me and Burn flying in the lead, like the avenging wings of night and day swooping down to set history right?

Who could have stopped us? The RainWings are no warriors; they would have rolled over and begged for mercy the moment they saw a SandWing's claws. The other NightWings would have joined me in a heartbeat.

And then they would have helped Burn in return … so what would the world look like now, if my plan had worked?

Queen Burn of the SandWings.

Queen Fierceteeth of the NightWings.

The prophecy: fulfilled the *right* way. The dragonets: all dead — such a sad story, but sacrifice is what happens to heroes, right?

(Well … maybe not *all* dead. I'd show mercy to my little brother, even though he betrayed us. No need to waste a NightWing. I'm sure he could be rehabilitated eventually.)

And I really would have saved my tribe — *me*, the dragonet with no destiny. *I'd* be the hero, after all that.

But the dream’s not dead, my friend. We can still make this happen, even if it’s with a slightly different cast of characters.

Listen, you’re clearly a smart dragon … well, let’s say smartish. I bet you supported Queen Burn. And I also bet you have someone else in mind for the throne now. From the way you’ve been skulking around, taking notes and studying everything, I bet you’re quite the useful inside dragon for somebody.

So be even more useful. Give yourself and your secret plan some allies that can really help you.

It’s very simple. We don’t like our queen. You don’t like your queen. Together we eliminate them, and then our tribes can go back to ignoring each other forever.

But first you have to get us out of here.

As soon as possible, please. I’m getting sick of smelling SandWings and eating dried camel every day.

— Fierceteeth

Did you read my letter? Why haven't you responded?

Saguaro, I am not a patient dragon. If you do not help us escape, I will tell someone what you've been up to. To be blunt: I'm sure the current SandWing queen would be *very* interested to hear about the mysterious spy among her guards.

VERY WELL, YOU MADDENING NIGHTWING. YOUR STORY HAS WARMED MY HEART, OR PERHAPS I JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY AND STOP SLIDING INCRIMINATING NOTES UNDER YOUR DOOR.

SO.

MIDNIGHT TOMORROW.

BE READY.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of

WINGS OF FIRE

BOOK SEVEN:

WINTER TURNING

No.

Thunder rumbled through the dark clouds like boulders sliding down a mountain.

What had Moon seen in his mind? What did she know?

Did she know that he felt — that he'd been thinking about *her* — her eyes and the way she tilted her head — her claws that could gently shield his scavenger one moment and rip apart a goat the next — the way she stood up to him the first time they met … but looked at him as though he was worth listening to …

She must know that he thought about her all the time.

Stop thinking about it. Don't think it — don't let her see any more —

"But you're safe now, I promise!" she said quickly, reaching toward him as he leaped back. "The rock you're holding — it's skyfire. It can shield your thoughts from me. As long as you're holding it or wearing it close to your scales, I can't hear anything you're thinking."

"Sounds like another NightWing lie," Winter snarled. *What have you seen in my head?* he thought fiercely.

Moon wiped raindrops from her eyes and took a deep breath. "I promise you, Winter. I can't hear anything in your mind right now. And even before, it was very … confusing."

Behind her, Qibli let out a snort that sounded a bit too amused.

"That's how I knew about Icicle and Scarlet," Moon said. "I heard them talking in Icicle's dream. And I heard Icicle planning to kill Starflight on her way to the library. But I can only hear what dragons are thinking right at

that moment — I can't reach in and rummage around in anyone's brain or anything like that."

Winter found this image not very reassuring at all.

"You've been listening to us from the moment you met us," he said. "Deceiving us. Spying on us." He hissed out a wisp of frostbreath, turning the raindrops around him into tiny chunks of ice that clattered to the ground. "I should have expected as much from a NightWing."

But not from *this* NightWing. He'd thought Moon was different. He'd begun to think she might be the only NightWing in the world he could trust.

And the whole time she'd been lying and snooping around in his thoughts.

He must be the most dim-witted dragon who'd ever lived.

I shouldn't have let my guard down. I've always been taught that NightWings are conniving, underhanded backstabbers; I know the history of what they did to us. This is just more proof of that.

"Go back to Jade Mountain, all of you," Winter said. "Leave me alone." He turned to the cage where his scavenger was still standing, staring mournfully out at the rain. "And you, GET OUT OF HERE!" he roared as loud as he could.

Bandit stumbled back with a cry of terror, then bolted out of the cage. The little creature tripped and sprawled on the wet leaves, scrambled upright again, and went galloping off into the dark forest.

Winter saw the look on Moon's face as she watched Bandit go — sympathetic, pitying, curious. No one else had ever been as interested in scavengers as he was.

He curled his talons around the skyfire rock. "I mean it. Go away. I'm going to the Ice Kingdom, and if you follow me, you'll die." He paused for a moment. "Not that I have any objection to your deaths, just to be clear. I just don't want to listen to you all breathing and flapping and saying stupid things all the way there."

"That *can't* be your plan," Qibli said. The SandWing was using his annoying "let's be sensible about this" voice. "Go home and beg for help?

By the time you get there, your brother might be dead. Your best chance is to catch Icicle."

"Before she kills Queen Glory," Kinkajou said fiercely. The little RainWing was now a mango orange color with streaks of black along her wings. She looked ready to fly into battle — but Icicle was a deadly warrior who could kill a vegetarian rainforest dragon with a snap of her tail.

"I don't need help from any of you," he snapped. "Especially you." He threw a glare at Moon, who folded her wings closer around herself but didn't look away.

"You do, actually," said Qibli. "You won't get two steps into the rainforest without our help — it's full of NightWings now, and everyone knows they don't like IceWings. And if you find Scarlet, do you think she'll just tell you where your brother is? Wouldn't it be useful and much more efficient to have a mind reader with you?"

"Oh, is that what you are now?" Winter asked Moon. "A clever tool that can be used by whoever needs some quick answers?"

"I won't let anyone use me," she said with a flash of anger. "But if I can do something good with this — this gift I didn't ask for, then yes, I'll do it."

"Um," Turtle interjected. Winter shifted his glare to the SeaWing, who had been quietly pacing in circles, splashing through the puddles with his huge talons. "Excuse me. What about the creepy prophecy? Is Jade Mountain in danger? Shouldn't we … you know, warn someone?"

"I'm not worried," Kinkajou said. "We know where the lost city of night is. The NightWings abandoned it when the volcano erupted, but we can still get to the island from the rainforest. That's easy. So we go to the lost city and then all those awful things won't happen and Jade Mountain will be fine. Right? Nothing to panic about."

Qibli let out a plume of fire, illuminating Moon's doubtful expression.

"I don't think it's that simple," she said. "The things I saw when the words came … the things I see in my nightmares … I can't imagine that just visiting the volcanic island could stop any of that from happening."

"Well, let's try it and see," Kinkajou said enthusiastically.

“But if it doesn’t work,” Turtle said, fidgeting nervously with his claws, “all those dragons at Jade Mountain — my sisters —”

“Hey, I agree with you,” Qibli said. “I’m completely feeling the doom right now. But do you think anyone will believe her?” He nodded at Moon. “When they’ve been told the NightWings have no powers now?”

“Sunny will,” Kinkajou said. “Tsunami might not. She doesn’t like prophecies much.”

“And then what — shut down the whole school based on a maybe-prophecy?” Qibli went on. “I don’t think they’ll do that. Besides, Winter’s problem is urgent. We have to find his brother before Scarlet kills him, so I vote we do that now and deal with the impending apocalypse afterward.”

“Me too,” Moon said.

What in the world made these dragons think *his* problem was *their* problem? Finding Hailstorm was urgent to Winter, but it made *no sense* for any NOT-IceWings to get involved at all.

Winter narrowed his eyes at Turtle, dripping forlornly into the puddles around his claws. It was easy to forget that the SeaWing was a royal prince as well — the son of Queen Coral. He never *acted* like royalty. Instead, Turtle behaved as though he didn’t want to be noticed at all — mumbly, sticking to the background, agreeing to anything.

Was he afraid of something? Or just boring?

If an IceWing acted the way Turtle does, he’d be stuck in the Seventh Circle forever.

Which meant Winter could get rid of him by applying the right pressure.

“You should go back,” he said, making Turtle jump. “You don’t want to tramp around Pyrrhia looking for my deadly sister, who will kill you on sight, or my brother, who might do the same because, by the way, killing SeaWings was a specialty of his. Go keep an eye on Jade Mountain instead.”

Turtle’s glow-in-the-dark scales flickered, illuminating his anxious face with pale greenish light. “But what if the mountain falls on me? Is it dangerous?”

“Not as dangerous as following me,” Winter hissed.

“It’s not going to fall on you, because we’re going to stop it,” Kinkajou said. “But don’t you want to stay with us?”

“I can’t decide what sounds worse,” Turtle admitted. “Chasing killer dragons across Pyrrhia or sitting at school waiting for some kind of thunder and ice catastrophe to drop on my head.”

“It’s all right,” Moon said. “Turtle, you can go back to Jade Mountain. You can tell them that we’re safe and where we’ve gone.”

“That’s true!” he said, perking up. “That would be useful of me, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably,” Qibli agreed. “Although you could be useful with us, too. But it’s your choice.”

Turtle shuffled backward. “I’ll tell Tsunami and the others not to worry about you. And I did promise Mother to watch out for Anemone, so I should, uh, I should really do that, you know? But you go catch the bad guys and stop the prophecy, and then I’ll see you all when you get back to school, okay?”

A moment later, the SeaWing had slipped away into the trees, and soon they heard muffled wet wingbeats as he flew away.

“Hmm,” Kinkajou said with a frown. “That was disappointing. How can we be the second coming of the five dragonets of destiny if there’s only four of us?”

“I highly doubt *we’re* destined for anything special,” Winter said.

“You’re not getting rid of the rest of us that easily,” Qibli said sharply to Winter, as though he knew exactly what Winter was trying to do.

“All right,” Winter growled. “Fine, let’s all go to the rainforest together like a soppy pile of MudWing siblings. I can look for Icicle and you can go dig around in the ashes of the Night Kingdom.”

“And I can save Queen Glory!” Kinkajou said, leaping into the air.

“Besides,” Qibli pointed out, flicking his tail at Winter, “that’ll actually bring you closer to the Ice Kingdom, since then you can use the tunnel that comes out north of Queen Thorn’s stronghold.”

That was true. Winter disliked it intensely when Qibli made clever observations like that, and it happened about forty times a day.

"I know," he said, looking down his nose at the SandWing. "Obviously I figured that out. That's the only reason I'm agreeing to this."

"Oh," Qibli said with a rakish grin. "I thought perhaps it was because I'm so charming and convincing."

"You are neither," Winter said. "In fact, if you don't shut up at once, I will change my mind."

Qibli pretended to wrap invisible chains around his snout and lifted his front talons innocently.

"Let's go," Moon said, spreading her wings and lifting off. Qibli and Kinkajou leaped after her.

Winter hesitated for a moment, watching the lightning flash in the sky beyond the flying dragons.

Why *was* he agreeing to this? An IceWing warrior didn't need help from anyone else, least of all a pack of misguided dragons from *other tribes.*

Take Qibli: Everyone knew SandWings were nearly as untrustworthy as NightWings, except half as smart and twice as likely to betray you for gold and treasure.

And a RainWing! They weren't even worth mentioning in the great IceWing sagas that told the history of this world. Lazy and insignificant and weak; there was no benefit to be gained from knowing them or befriending them.

Worst of all, how could he ally himself with a NightWing — even temporarily, even if he went into it knowing not to trust her? To travel with Moon, to spend a single moment longer with her, knowing what he knew now …

(And yet … still feeling something he *should not be feeling* …)

I should stay as far away from her as I can.

Mother and Father would be more than disappointed in me. If they heard of this, any potential position in the palace would be gone forever. I'd

land at the bottom of the Seventh Circle and have to choose between the Diamond Trial orbeing stationed on an arctic island outpost for the rest of my life.

He could see their faces so clearly — that look they got whenever he did something wrong. The look that said, *if only we'd lost you instead of Hailstorm. If only you met any of our expectations. If only you were everything an IceWing should be.*

"Winter!" Qibli called from above. The others were hovering up there, waiting for him. "Come on!"

This was only temporary, he reminded himself. Get to the rainforest, look for Icicle. Then he could rescue Hailstorm by himself. That's what a true IceWing prince would do.

He wasn't really working with Moon and the others. He didn't have to listen to them, and he certainly wouldn't ask them for help.

Most of all, he would never, never trust them, especially that lying NightWing.

Shaking rain off his tail with a clatter of spikes, he ascended into the storm, wheeled around in a circle, and took off toward the rainforest without a glance at the other dragons.

BOOK ONE:
THE DRAGONET PROPHECY

BOOK TWO:
THE LOST HEIR

BOOK THREE:
THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

BOOK FOUR:
THE DARK SECRET

BOOK FIVE:
THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT

BOOK SIX:
MOON RISING

BOOK SEVEN:
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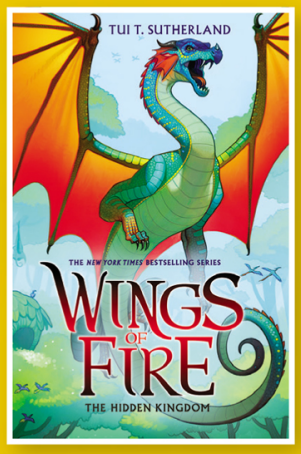

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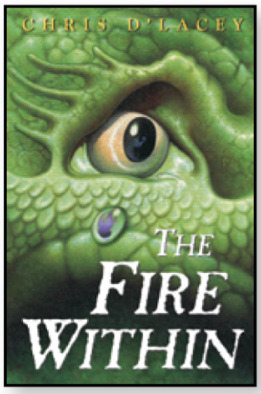

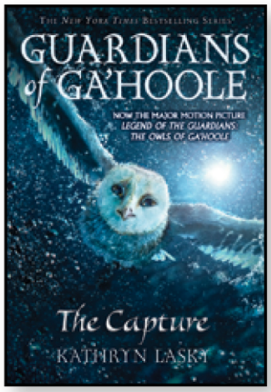

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First edition, April 2015

Cover design by Phil Falco

e-ISBN 978-0-545-85537-2